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- ACABO -
The Assessment Center for Future Professional Officers in the
Swiss Army

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Summary: Each future professional officer of the Swiss armed forces has to pass an assessment center even before he starts his studies at the Military College. During this three-day procedure his personality characteristics and social behaviour are observed and appraised by several trained assessors /observers. The paper describes the organisational and scientific bases of this procedure, it explains which behavioural dimensions are used in which exercise and gives an account of the different steps of the assessment process. It ends with a description of the main evaluation results and with an indication of possible trends.

1. Introduction / starting point

In the winter semester 1991/92 the Swiss Military College (SMC) at the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH) opened a six-semester diploma study course for future professional officers. This education is not only focused on military and technical skills. The course should enable the participants to become convincing, target- and human-oriented leaders as well as instructing officers with a good general knowledge, who can also express themselves in a committed and competent way on non-military issues.

All the students of the Swiss Military College are both high school graduates (Matura) and officers of the Swiss Armed Forces. As in any other academic course seminar papers and test results can provide valuable clues to the abilities of the students. Yet, most of these criteria assess intellectual abilities (academic course) or practical skills (service with troops), which is important but not sufficient for the appraisal of future professional officers (Steiger, 1992).

As a result a procedure for the appraisal of personal and social competence was developed

and in 1992 the „freshmen“ of the diploma studies were the first to undergo an Assessment Center at the Swiss Military College. The aim of the SMC-Assessment was to gather clues for an appraisal by establishing a strengths/weaknesses profile and to give feedback linked to a plan of action. In this form the AC was neither a pure selection instrument, nor a long-term potential appraisal. Experience later on showed that it is possible with this instrument to obtain fair and sound assessments. In 1996 the AC eventually became a definite selection tool. Now the Assessment Center for Future Professional Officers regularly takes place before the beginning of the course of study.

2. Dimensions and exercises

The procedure of this AC was designed on the one hand with the help of militia officers who have first hand experience with assessment centres owing to their civil professional function. Professional officers with many years of experience and a large know-how on the other hand helped to formulate a job requirement profile. Furthermore, the persons responsible for the AC relied on experiences of the Israeli and Swedish Army, who at that time already used such tools.

Having in mind this theoretical and practical background, the persons responsible for the AC asked the following questions:

„How should a future professional officer behave as

- a teacher
- an educator
- a superior
- a colleague / subordinate
- a friend
- in a social context in general?“

In a pragmatic procedure, which relied on the Critical Incidents Technique (Flanagan, 1954), the requirements were specified during several sessions, which finally resulted in specific dimensions and exercises. Content and basic norms of the SMC-assessment were the result of an expert rating in the framework of a group process. They are thus an image of the corporate identity and leadership culture in the Swiss Armed Forces (Annen, 1995).

Currently the requirement profile a ACABO candidate has to fulfil consists of the following seven dimensions:

Personal characteristics

- personal attitude
- motivational behaviour
- analysis

Social behaviour

- social contact
- oral communication
- dealing with conflicts
- influencing behaviour

These dimensions are explicitly defined and handed out in written form to the observers. Examples of behaviour further illustrate the definitions of the dimensions.

The exercises must be designed in such a way as to enable the observers to make clear observations about the dimension in question, which must be visibly linked to the activity of a professional officer. By focusing on activities a candidate might meet immediately after completion of the SMC-studies, the following exercises were designed:

Spontaneous short oral presentation

Each participant makes a five-minute oral presentation in front of the other participants, the assessors, observers and the scientific staff. His task is to introduce himself and to give his view on a thesis he is given five minutes beforehand, so he can prepare his presentation while the previous presenter is making his presentation.

Leaderless group discussion I

The main characteristic of this exercise is its double aim: on the one hand to impose your own interest and on the other hand to represent the interests of the group.

Motivational talk

In a role play, the participant has to convince someone to carry out an unpleasant task, to

resign himself/herself to a situation or not to give up in a difficult situation.

Leaderless group discussion II

The group chooses a topic and is then split into a pro- and contra-group. In the discussion that follows, one party has to convince the other of the value of their arguments.

Short cases

Each participant is given at random three delicate situations taken from everyday activities of a professional officer. He then explains how he himself would behave in such a situation.

Oral presentation

The candidate gives a fifteen-minute lecture on a specific topic taken from military pedagogic. The candidate is given the topic as well as additional literature on the topic already at the beginning of the ACABO; he can then use his free time between the exercises to prepare his presentation.

Proficiency tests

The participants take three standardised proficiency tests on numerical, verbal and figural issues.

Self appraisal

During their free time the candidates have to work out a self appraisal. Based on a certain number of guidelines, they should find out and analyse their strengths and weaknesses. The result is not assessed but it is used as an additional source of information for the feedback talks.

The behavioural dimensions which have to be clearly defined and relevant to the requirements as well as the realistic exercises form the framework in which the observers can gather their raw material to assess the candidates.

3. The assessment process

The observer team is composed of superiors and chiefs of training who are recruited above all from divisions which have sent AC candidates. They are backed by militia officers who - owing to their civilian job - are closely familiar with personnel selection and human resources management.

During the three-day Assessment Center, each participant is appraised by several observers. A watchful eye is kept on the fact that during the whole process observation and appraisal are strictly kept apart. The assessors and the

scientific staff are responsible for the strict observation of these principles.

At the end of the AC an appraisal matrix for each participant is established, which is then discussed during the observer conference. Finally a consensus-based decision is taken. A positive result is a decisive requirement for the admission to the courses of the SMC-studies. The observations made during the assessment centre are then included in a structured report and shown to the candidate during a personal interview. The results of the Assessment Center could be expressed by the qualification „passed“ or „failed“. Yet an equally or even more important part of the procedure is the discussion in which the superior explains the ratings and shows the candidate a plan of action to improve his behaviour. This procedure clearly demonstrates the human-oriented attitude on which the ACABO is based.

Before each ACABO observers and assessors are prepared for their demanding task in a task-oriented training. The following items are important:

- assessment procedure and correct handling of the forms,
 - adding personal remarks,
 - tendencies which are frequent with observers and measures to counter them,
- and in view of the observer conference
- chances and dangers of group decision processes.

It should have become clear that the quality of an appraisal system depends on the acceptance and handling of those who are involved. The procedure itself can only convince all persons involved when it is constantly subjected to a critical quality control.

4. Evaluation

From the start the persons responsible for the ACABO have constantly and comprehensively evaluated the system in order to detect errors and to improve the procedure. This evaluation is never completed given the fundamental decisions which are taken at the ACABO and the scientific standards which are the frame of reference for any assessment center user.

A great importance is given to the view of the candidates. As long as they have the impression of having undergone a fair and job-oriented procedure, they will accept the results and the

recommendations. The feedback resulting from a survey done immediately after the completion of ACABO is over all very positive.

- More than 80% of the 250 participants so far think that they had sufficient occasion to show their strengths during the Assessment Center.
- Over 90% of the candidates indicate that - apart from the normal tensions experienced in an exam-like situation - they felt quite comfortable during the three-day AC.
- 95 % of the ACABO candidates consider the exercises realistic. So far no candidate has said that he had to undergo a procedure which was not practice-oriented.

Since 1998 opinions regarding the final report have also been gathered. It is important and good to hear that no one has had the impression that that he was misjudged in the final report. It seems that candidates have experienced the ACABO as a test procedure where serious thought is given to their behaviour. Consequently the confidence in the appraisal that follows the AC is very strong.

The survey done with the candidates records vital aspects of the social validity. It is easy to do and to evaluate. The results show if it is possible to carry on or if specific changes are necessary. The candidates must feel that their personalities are treated in a fair and systematic way. If this were not the case, the procedure would lose contact with reality and fundamental changes would become inevitable.

In 1995 a major study of validity was carried out. The results regarding construct and criteria validity were within the frame of acknowledged research in this area. Specific results from the study had not only consequences for the ACABO. Lessons learnt are now also applied for the appraisal procedure in everyday military life.

Another empirical test was carried out in 1998. The subjects of the test were the interrater reliability and the behaviour of the observers. Results and consequences were presented and discussed in the following assessor and observer training. Further improvements could be reached through practical exercises and a more detailed description in the assessor documents.

5. Outlook

ACABO has proved its practical worth as a selection instrument. Acceptance with personnel

managers and superiors is high. It is currently the instrument which is scientifically the best founded in the whole management development process for professional officers in the Swiss Army.

Training and education of the professional officer in Swiss Army XXI will change. Qualities such as „ethic attitude“ or „cultural competencies“

might become more significant. Besides continuous improvements based on theory and practice it is therefore vital to anticipate such developments. An instrument for selection and potential appraisal would miss its target if it didn't consider developments which are showing on the horizon.